

May 28, 2017  
NT: Luke 22:19-20  
OT: Joshua 4:4-7  
“Re-membering”  
Michael Stanfield

Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. Joshua said to them, ‘Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, “What do those stones mean to you?” then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.’

The words from God for the people of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth, the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen

As a human race, we like to remember things ... special things. And we do so in some remarkably creative ways. Just think of the memorials in Washington, D.C. alone! Former presidents Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington are all remembered by monuments, statues and obelisks. Wars and the soldiers who died in them are remembered – World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Elsewhere in the country, tragic events, like Pearl Harbor, the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 are memorialized as well. In addition to buildings, we also set aside certain days to remember individuals and events that mean a lot to our collective experience as Americans – again, presidents Lincoln and Washington, for example, in February; and Martin Luther King Jr. in January. In July we set aside one day to celebrate our independence. In November, we remember our veterans. We’ve made these memorials so that we never forget.

But there is something that tends to happen to our monuments and our special days over time. *They become detached from the story that led to their creation.* Consider Memorial Day itself; it’s a day to remember fallen soldiers who died serving their country. Yet for most of us, it’s simply a day off work, a holiday marking the blessed beginning of the summer.

Our morning text from Joshua refers to a memorial. The people of Israel were on the final leg of their journey to the Promised Land after fleeing from slavery in Egypt. But one final barrier lay before them: the Jordan River. God instructed Joshua to send the priests, carrying the Ark of the Covenant into the river. As soon as their feet touched the water, the Jordan parted, just as the Red Sea had parted with Moses, and once again, it remained parted while the entire horde of Israel crossed on the dry riverbed.

The experience of the Israelites was that God had been miraculously and personally present with them as they crossed the Jordan and it was an event worth memorializing. So Joshua is inspired by God to have one man from each of the 12 tribes take a stone from the riverbed and carry it onto the riverbank on the side of the newly entered territory. There, Joshua heaps the 12 stones up as a memorial – a monument – to commemorate God’s intervention at the river. Notice Joshua’s closing words: “So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.”

A memorial, forever. Right. Predictably, subsequent generations of Israelites did not care or find the need to remember the things their ancestors' monuments symbolized.

The same trend continues today regarding *our* memorials as new generations come along. If they were not part of the events and factors that were important to our parents' and grandparents' generations, it's common for us not to assign those things the same value.

Despite the various monuments the people *of one generation* erect, the *next generation* invariably is less interested in what they represent. For some, they become mere piles of rock. Joshua may have hoped that subsequent generations would ask, "What do those stones mean?" but, in fact, many didn't bother. This tendency ended up becoming a problem for Israel. Throughout her history, one of God's chief charges against Israel was, "They have forgotten me" (Jer. 18:15; Ez. 22:12).

In fact there are two things the bible records that God says more often than anything else: "Do not be afraid" and "Remember."

Remember. Have you ever really thought about this word? Re-member? It means literally to reassemble the disparate parts or cut off members back into an original whole. Both the community and the individual become whole, then, through the act of re-membering.

Without memories that are properly interpreted into a redeeming story, a cohesive identity is not possible. So, a refusal to re-member means we are without a chance to become a coherent whole. Without a meaningful act of re-membering, what we truly value is not available to be re-assembled. Memory is therefore extremely important.

How many of you are fans of the Jason Bourne novels and films? Fan or not, they have an amazing mass appeal. But why? It is not the fact that the films are action packed blockbusters. A lot of blockbusters over the last 15 years have failed at the box office. So what has kept fans returning? It is the larger theme in the films of Bourne's journey to wholeness through the process of his re-membering who he is. It is why the last film failed so miserably. We already knew who Jason Bourne was. The journey was complete. His memory was restored. He was made whole. There was, thus, nothing really to add but money in the coffers of film-makers.

*What* we re-member and *how* we remember it is a sacred task that has huge consequences in how we live. Consider the Ponte Vecchio – the bridge in Florence, Italy that dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Its rich history includes, among other things, the fact that Dante first spied the girl Beatrice there. His soul awoke with a lightning flash and her image forever after functioned as his Muse inspiring him to write "The Divine Comedy," arguably the most influential literary work in Western History.

Well, this sacred memory was held by all Europeans in the in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. And During WWII it actually kept the Nazis from destroying that bridge in 1944 – even when allied forces were advancing toward Germany. They destroyed every other strategic bridge to halt that advance; but not the Ponte Vecchio. They spared *it* and why? Because there, Dante's love first inspired one of the West's greatest contributions to literature.

What we remember and how we remember it matters. Take Memorial Day. Memorial Day got its start after the Civil War, when freed slaves and abolitionists gathered in Charleston, South Carolina to honor Union soldiers who gave their lives to battle slavery. But the holiday was so closely associated with the Union side, and the fight for emancipation, that Southern states quickly established their own rival Confederate Memorial Day.

And so it was that over the next 50 years, Memorial Day changed. It became a tribute to the dead on both sides and to the reunion of the North and the South after the war. This new holiday was more useful to a forward-looking nation eager to put its differences behind it. But something important was lost: the memory that the Civil War had ultimately been a moral battle to free black Americans from slavery. And as we continue to discover as a nation, true healing from such an abomination as slavery based on race is impossible when we choose simply to forget it.

In *Race and Reunion*, David Blight, a professor at Yale, tells the full story of Memorial Day's transformation – and what has been lost as a result. War commemorations, he makes clear, do not just pay tribute to the war dead. They also reflect a nation's ultimate understanding of particular wars; and they get edited for political reasons, not spiritual ones. So Memorial Day is now a day, oddly, not only of remembering, but of selective forgetting.

The Memorial Day we now celebrate made it easier for Northern and Southern *whites* to come together; it kept the focus where political and business leaders wanted it: on national progress. But it came at the expense of African Americans, whose status at the end of Reconstruction was more than a little precarious. Adam Cohen, "What the history of Memorial Day teaches about honoring the war dead," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2007.

God's charge to re-member is not for God's benefit. It is for ours and when we forget for political reasons, it causes generations of suffering.

And lest we rationalize that we are talking here about "secular" culture, and that surely the Church is different, re-member with me a story now from the annals of the Presbyterian church. It actually begins in nearby Boonville in 1861. That year, the Boonville Presbyterian church hosted a statewide gathering of Presbyterians. Delegates from all over Missouri met in the church's sanctuary.

At the meeting, the Pastor and many members of the Boonville Presbyterian Church offered a resolution requesting that the national church support the "Southern cause". A slight majority approved the resolution. The action resulted in the delegates, favoring the Northern view, to march out of the meeting and across the street to Thespian Hall to finish their business.

Well, this schism that began in Boonville spread to the national church, ultimately dividing our denomination into the "Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America" and the "Presbyterian Church in the United States of America." Following the war, the southern church became known as the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

Fast forward now to 1983. For, it was in that year that the two denominations finally reunited in Atlanta, Georgia. As a memorial of the original split, the chalice of the First Presbyterian Church of Boonville was used to start the reunion celebration of Holy Communion because of the

significance of the crucial vote that took place in that sanctuary that had split the denomination back in 1861. [http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMH5D7\\_Civil\\_War\\_in\\_Boonville\\_Boonville\\_Mo](http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMH5D7_Civil_War_in_Boonville_Boonville_Mo)

But before you get all warm and fuzzy, consider the rest of the story. The 1983 reunion event was billed as a “final healing of the wounds from the Civil War.” Yet, in all of my readings of that reunion event – and I spent a great deal of time researching that this week – I could find nothing that directly addressed the southern Church’s support of slavery that caused the split in the first place, or of their continued advocacy of Jim Crow after the Civil War– nothing about repentance on the side of the old Southern Church and not even anything about forgiveness on the side the old Northern Church. Acquiescence to political pressure to do the right thing by way of forgetting does not amount to healing. Far from the anticipated growth as a result of the reunion, our denomination has shrunk since – and drastically.

What we remember and how we remember it is important. It has consequences that are far-reaching. Events in the past tend to haunt us and thwart even our noblest attempts to move forward if they are not re-membered and given their proper meaning in the present.

Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, broke bread and poured wine and said what? “Do this in remembrance of me.” – not “Forget about Good Friday – just remember my resurrection.” but, “Do this in remembrance of my suffering and my death.” Why? Because it is his death that demonstrates the depth of God’s love and forgiveness. Jesus knew that Memory is this powerful ability we have to recall something in such a way as to make it a present reality, transforming the present for the better. In fact, that is *the* meaning of the mass in the Catholic Church – that the death and resurrection of Christ is an eternal act of God’s grace that by re-membering in the mass, becomes transformative now.

Of course, the meaning of past events can never be quite the same for us as for those who lived through them. But this I know without a shadow of a doubt: stories that are truly personal and transformative can make past events into redemptive sagas that are still alive, powerfully influencing us in the present.

So, our job is not to force others to bow at our most meaningful memorials, but to do all we can to help them understand why they have meaning for us; to do all we can to tell the story with passion through our own eyes and with our own voice. The tale of what God has done through Christ is not good news if it is nothing but a monument we worship weekly to a dead hero.

The story must come alive *in* us – by the way we re-member it – by what we convey about it that has changed everything for us personally toward more grace-filled living. It is the only way I know that we can help future generations, as well as strangers, know us and know our loving God, when all they see from West Rollins Road is a pile of stones.

We want the generations ahead of us to see and understand what is important and valuable to us. We hope some of those things, including faith in God, and love of their enemies will become of equal value to them. But we don’t want them bound or limited by our understandings and conclusions. We want what we have valued in our re-membering to inform them so they have the best chance of experiencing God’s free grace and love for themselves.

So, when we build our memorials, when we re-member, we need to be less concerned that they are set in stone for younger generations, than being ready to help them *understand the deeply personal redemptive story that stands behind the memorial*. If we've been faithful in living up to the stories our monuments represent, hopefully, ours will serve as building blocks for their own re-membrances, their own monuments.

And if you are in the generations coming on, don't be too quick to dismiss what may seem to be stuck-in-the-mud ways of doing things in the generations ahead of you. There are values behind those things that are worth knowing about.

In the last scene of the musical *Camelot*, King Arthur spins out a song filled with memories of what had been the most idyllic place on earth. Alone on stage, the broken, forgiving king begs us to remember when he says:

*Ask ev'ry person if they've heard the story,  
And tell it strong and clear if they have not,  
That once there was a fleeting wisp of glory  
Called Camelot.*

*Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot  
For one brief, shining moment  
That was known as Camelot.*

Keep the story going, begs King Arthur. Pass it on to your children and your children's children; and in the very re-remembering, you will keep the dream alive. In the midst of the despair around you, recall this time, this special place. And, perhaps – who knows – perhaps this one brief, shining moment will come again...

With this in mind, Church historian Rosemary Radford Ruether says there are two things the church must do:

1. One is to pass on the tradition from one generation to another. Like King Arthur's song: "Ask ev'ry person if they've heard the story, and tell it loud and clear if they have not." Tell the story of Jesus to your children and your children's children. But that's not all, says Ruether.
2. There is a second thing the church must do. Be open to the winds of the Spirit by which the tradition comes alive in each generation. That is different than Camelot, deeper than mere wrote **memory**. Barbara Lundblad, "I will not leave you orphaned," sermon for May 1, 2005, on the *Day 1 Website*. day1.org. Retrieved December 5, 2016.

Indeed. Let us pray. Gracious God we thank you for the gift of memory. Make us whole by helping us rightly to re-member, making your story our story. As we build our monuments, give us the gift of bringing the story behind the monument alive that it's sacredness to us may be imparted to others in the telling and that its fullness and truth may provide the path of healing and wholeness for others. Now bless these gifts we give as we re-member your mighty acts. In Christ's name we pray, amen.